



Human Rights Council  
Forum on Minority Issues  
Eleventh Session  
29 – 30 November 2018  
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Agenda Item 2: Root causes and consequences of statelessness affecting minorities: preventing statelessness through a human rights approach

Causes and Consequences of statelessness in Greece:  
The Article 19 and the Muslim Turkish Minority of Western Thrace

After the First World War, ethnically non-Greek minority groups in Greece were subjected to a variety of state policies aiming ethno-cultural and linguistic homogenization of the old and new lands of Greece. A crucial instrument in the application these policies turned out to be denationalization of non-Greek ethnic groups residing in different parts of the country. The Article 19 of the Greek Citizenship Code (hereinafter “Article 19”) became to be the most prominent measure of depriving citizens of Greek citizenship. From its introduction in 1955 until its abolition in 1998, it functioned as the main instrument for enabling non-ethnic Greek citizen lose their citizenship and become stateless people inside or outside Greece. According to this law,

*“A person of non-Greek ethnic origin leaving Greece without intention of returning may be declared as having lost Greek nationality. This also applies to a person of non-Greek ethnic origin born and domiciled abroad. His children living abroad may be declared as having lost Greek nationality if both their parents and the surviving parent have lost the same. The Minister of the Interior decides in these matters with the concurring opinion of the National Council.”*

Here, it is clear that Article 19 targets directly those Greek citizens who are ethnically different than the majority of the Greek society. The primary minority group in Greece that has been suffering from this denationalization application is members of the Muslim Turkish minority in Western Thrace region of the country. In fact, some other minority groups - such as Macedonians - were also targeted by similar measures prior to 1955 as a result of which thousands of them left the country, lost their citizenship, became stateless in other countries and never returned to Greece.

By the application of Article 19, an estimated 60.000 people lost their citizenship almost all of whom were members of the Muslim Turkish minority of Western Thrace and the Muslim Turkish minority of Rhodes and Kos islands located in the Dodecanese region. The official statement released by the Greek Ministry of Interior in April 2005 gives this figure as 46.638.

The main reason why Greece insisted on the application of this ethnically and racially discriminatory provision was to rid itself of those ethnic Turks who have been living in Western Thrace for centuries. Thus, from time to time Greek authorities used their power emanating from Article 19 and deprived ethnic Turkish citizens of Greece from citizenship.

This type of denationalization happened generally when a member of the Muslim Turkish minority paid visit to Turkey but there were many others whose citizenship were revoked even though they had never left the country. They were given special ID cards that proved their statelessness status.



It is imperative to underline that Greece's administrative bodies decided unilaterally on the intention of the Minority members about leaving the country. That is, Muslim Turks had never been officially asked whether they wanted give up their Greek citizenship or not. Thus, the vast majority of them were informed about deprivation of their citizenship either when they reached the border point on their way back to Greece or when they wanted to renew their passports at the Greek Consulates or Embassies abroad. Additionally, official decisions about denaturalization were not communicated to the victims in advance. Thus, the legal revision period was missed as a result of which Turks lost their citizenships permanently. In fact, turning into stateless people based on Article 19 turned out to be one of the most significant issues regarding the Muslim Turkish demographical presence in Western Thrace particularly between 1970s and 1990s.

The abolishment of Article 19 on 23 January 1998 was initially welcomed by members of the Muslim Turkish minority on the grounds that a racist application targeting their survival and continuity was finally over. Yet, in the passage of time it became clear that Greece had not repealed Article 19 retroactively. That is to say, Greek nationality to thousands of Muslim Turks deprived of Greek citizenship under Article 19 between 1955 and 1998 would not be given back. From 1998 until 2018, Greece returned citizenship to almost all of the victims of Article 19 who were residing in Greece as stateless. The rest who had no right to enter Greece continued living as stateless people or applied later for citizenship of their countries of residence.

For the last two decades, Greece took no official step so as to reinstate tens of thousands of those sufferers of Article 19 and their children who continue living permanently abroad. In fact, they have the right to apply for Greek citizenship through the naturalization procedure. Nevertheless, even if they used to be ex-citizens of Greece they will be treated the same as all other foreign nationals. That is, neither a special procedure nor a privilege is to be granted to them due to their ex-Greek citizenship. This type of nationality reacquisition not only takes quite a long time but also it is highly costly for the applicant without any guarantee to obtain the Greek nationality. Therefore, the number of application from those victims of Article 19 to regain their Greek citizenship through naturalization remains very low as of 2018.

Thus, the Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association urges Greece:

- To respect the principle of equality among its citizens.
- To emphasize the decades-long plight of those victims of Article 19 residing inside Greece and abroad.
- To introduce special procedure for nationality reacquisition only by those people who lost their Greek citizenship under Article 19.